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UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SELECT COMMITTEE ON ASSASSINATIONS

Interview with

Mr THOMAS SMITH

on

Friday, August 11, 1978

at

New Scotland Yard, London, England

On behalf of Select Committee:

Mr ROBIN D. LINDLEY - Staff Attorney

Mr CHARLES H. ROGOVIN - Special Counsel

Present:

Detective Chief Superintendent Frank Cater

Mr Richard W. Davies - Commissioner's
Solicitors Department

Mr Richard H. Balment - Court reporter.

MR ROGOVIN: Mr Smith, would you state your name and official address?

A Yes. My full name is Thomas Smith. I am a Detective Superintendent of the Metropolitan Police, attached to Central Office, New Scotland Yard. I have been in the service for 27 years.

(Mr Cater left at this point)

Q Mr Smith, I would like to take you back to approximately June 8th, 1968. At that time were you a serving officer in the Metropolitan Police Department?

A I was, yes.

Q Could you tell me, sir, your rank and assignment at that time?

A Yes. I was a First Class Detective Sergeant, serving with the Flying Squad, attached to New Scotland Yard.

Q On the 8th June, 1968, did you have occasion to receive an assignment from a superior officer with regard to a person known or described to you then or thereafter as one James Earl Ray?

A I did, sir, yes. I had been assigned by my chief (who was then Detective Chief Superintendent Butler) to take up duty at Cannon Row Police Station, which is in Central London, and ordered to sit in the cell with Ray. It was on a Sunday. My period of detention with him was from 2 p.m. to 10 p.m.

Q What instructions or advice did you receive from your superior with regard to the nature of your assignment at that time?

A My instructions were quite clear, that I was there solely to see that he remained in safe custody. I was also instructed that I was not to discuss the case with him. That would be pretty obvious at the time, because I knew none of the details, anyway, other than the fact that this man was alleged to have shot Martin Luther King in the United States. It was also brought home to me the fact that if any evidence that I considered was material and should be brought to the notice of the American authorities, I would, of course, note it in the usual way and report it in the usual way.

Q When you arrived at Cannon Row Police Station, did you relieve another officer who was carrying out, as far as you knew, the same duty to which you were assigned?

A I did, yes. That officer was then a serving officer, Sergeant East.

Q By the way, Mr Smith, at this time in 1968 your rank was what?

A Detective Sergeant First Class.

Q And you relieved another Sergeant upon your arrival?

A First Class, yes.

Q I assume you went into a cell with the prisoner at that point

A I did, yes. I had another junior officer with me. He has since left the Force. For about the first hour Ray was very quiet. I think I had said "Good afternoon" to him. I don't think he replied. I understood his demeanor, bearing in mind that he had only just previously been

arrested, and I considered then that he was in a rather vulnerable position. There was a newspaper in the cell. It was a Sunday newspaper, the News of the World. I knew that Ray was trying to hide his true identity. I picked up the newspaper and on the front page was a rather large photograph of James Earl Ray. The photograph clearly showed that the man I was sitting with and the man in that photograph was one and the same person. In the photograph he was wearing what appeared to be a multi-colored (although the photograph was in black and white) shirt. I clearly remember saying to Ray "This photograph is of you", and he then agreed that it was. Therefore, I had then established in my own mind that he was Ray. I asked him where the photograph had been taken and he said it was some years previous when, I think he said, he had been doing some lumberjacking in Canada. He also said - I cannot remember whether it was to a question from me or what I had read in the newspaper or whether he had volunteered the information - that he was a prisoner unlawfully at large from a penitentiary in the States, having been sentenced to 8 to 20 years imprisonment for an offence of robbery. I asked him how he escaped from prison. He just replied that that was another story. This angle was not pursued. He denied that he had shot Martin Luther King. He also mentioned a white Mustang car. It may well have been that these details were already in this newspaper. My recollection with regard to the vehicle was a suggestion on his part that fingerprints could easily be planted anywhere.

- Q I assume, Mr Smith, that there was some conversation about fingerprints on portions of that white Mustang car?
- A My recollection leads me to believe that there was some possible conversation regarding fingerprints on that car. I would emphasise the point: I am sure that came from him and was not as a result of a question regarding fingerprints.
- Q Precisely. Did the conversation at any time turn to the matter of extradition which had been requested by the United States authorities of the British authorities?
- A Yes, it did indeed. The main theme of his thinking by this time was that he wanted to beat extradition; in other words, he wanted to stay in this country as long as possible. He mentioned to me that it was within his knowledge that there were two warrants out for his arrest in the United States. One was held by the FBI and the other by a County Marshall or Sheriff. He clearly indicated that if he was extradited, his wish would be that it would be on the County warrant and not the Federal warrant, as one was clearly for conspiracy to murder and the other one was for the substantive offence of murder.
- Q Did you derive an understanding, Mr Smith, of what Mr Ray's reasoning was with regard to his expressed desire to be returned on the County warrant; in other words, why he felt it was in his interest to be returned on the County warrant?
- A Yes. He expressed this in terms of the question of a jury. He felt that if he was arrested on the County warrant, then the jury could not possibly be impartial - there would be

the question of color - and that there is no way in which the authorities could give him a fair and unbiased trial. This seemed to be the tack that he was going on with regard to these warrants. I recall now that the question of the conspiracy, as opposed to the substantive offence of murder, was one that he had obviously considered in the light of legal procedures; but I had no wish to get into any legal discussions with him, not being familiar with the laws of the United States.

Q Were you, as a consequence of these conversations with Ray, able to form any opinion or do you have any present recollection of your impression of the level of his intelligence?

A I did not regard him as an intelligent person. I certainly did not regard him as highly intelligent, because, to my way of thinking, the consequences that were likely to ensue now, or then, were that he knew he was going to be taken back to the United States. Although on occasions he did say that he did not shoot Martin Luther King, he did not appear to say it with a lot of conviction.

Q Did anything occur at any time in the course of this assignment for you, this eight hour tour of duty, which led you to believe that he had been in England before the day he was apprehended at London Airport, which would have been, we believe, June 8th, the day before your assignment began?

A Yes. There was one incident during that tour of duty where for some reason - and I cannot remember the reason - I took

out of my pocket some British currency coins. We had not long gone over to decimalisation - I cannot remember the year we had gone over, but it had not been long - and I produced a 10 pence piece, and he happened to say that that was the new 10 pence piece. I said to him, "How do you know that? As far as I understand, you have never been in this country before", and he said, "Mr Smith, I should be more careful before I make such observations in the future". I thought it was a little unfair of me to make the point, so I dropped it, and, there again, this matter was not pursued. But he did say in fact that he had been in the country before. To my recollection, he mentioned Earls Court.

Q. Earls Court being an area of London?

A. Yes.

Q. Throughout the balance of the time you spent with him, were there any other comments or observations that might be interesting that Mr Ray may have made?

A. I cannot recall now any other observations he may have made.

Q. Did at any time the conversation turn to what the criminal community in the States would refer to as "the Chair", meaning the electric chair?

A. Yes. At some stage he did mention - again, this was in relation to the possibility of conviction with juries and what-have-you - that, of course, he could finish up in the electric chair.

Q. Were you aware, Mr Smith, either from comments made to you

by police colleagues, police superiors, before you commenced the duty assignment or from the newspaper article or from anything in conversation with Ray, whether at the time he was apprehended at the London Airport he had been armed?

A He did mention to me about his arrest; he did say he had the opportunity at some stage to have shot the Special Branch officer - I remember he referred to him as "the Special Branch officer" - when he took him through a door at the airport into a room. I am sure he said that the officer walked in front of him and that he could have had ample opportunity to have shot him.

Q Did he indicate why he did not for any reason?

A No. He was just, I think, trying to impart to me the fact that he was not a cold-blooded killer. That is the impression I got.

Q Can you think, Mr Smith, of anything else that might be of interest to us with regard to this duty assignment?

A No, I can't recall any other observations that were made. As I say, as far as I am concerned, there was nothing in any of the conversations that I had with him that I felt I was duty-bound to report. I tried to stick as near as I possibly could to my terms.

Q I take it then, Mr Smith, that nothing prior to the assignment - when I say "nothing", I mean nothing of which you learned prior to the assignment - nothing which took place during the assignment and nothing you may have heard

or learned subsequent to the assignment impacted you in any way which would have, in the course of your police conduct, suggested to you the filing of any formal report of any kind?

A No, that is true. At no time did I feel that there was any material evidence that would have assisted anyone.

Q Because - I want to be certain I have covered this - you were not assigned to conduct an interrogation of Ray?

A Certainly not, no.

Q This was not what we would call in the States an investigation by you?

A Certainly not. We had very clear instructions that we were there as jailers and jailers only.

Q Effectively a special security detail pure and simple?

A Indeed.

Q Thank you.

Mr Davies, any other questions?

MR DAVIES: I have no questions.

MR ROGOVIN: Thank you very much, Mr Smith..

(Interview commenced at 10.10 a.m. and
concluded at 10.31 a.m.)



Thomas Smith